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Developing the structural capital of Higher Education Institutions to support work-based learning programmes

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Abstract

Structural capital is concerned with the organising and structuring capability of an organisation and is expressed in formal policies, regulations, procedures, codes, functional business units, task groups, committees or less formal cultures, networks and practices which influence practices and procedures (Stewart 1997). This chapter identifies key aspects of the university's structural capital which enable WBL programmes to function within the university and work with organisations to achieve successful partnerships in WBL. Structural capital enables HEI's to meet the needs of the customer - as in both learner and external organisation - as well as enabling internal processes to respond to external demands (Edvinson & Malone 1997) and is explored within four illustrative case studies from two Universities. It discusses the structures required to support learning partnerships, such as development of staff and flexible curricula. It considers some of the formal practices and procedures required to enable effective WBL programmes, such as academic accreditation of external learning and training. It recognises the need for sound infrastructures to support learning processes, such as administrative systems, which are able to acknowledge the non-traditional nature of WBL learners and respond to the particular needs of the learners and their organisations.

- Structural Capital (SC) is concerned with an organisation's structuring capability to meet the needs of the external customer, i.e. the learner/worker and external organisations
- SC is expressed in policies, regulations, procedures, task groups, committees, networks and practices and is reflected in the formal and informal infrastructure of knowledge held within an organisation
- SC's value is its contribution to an organisation's purpose through the formulation and dissemination of organisational aims and/or decision-making processes
- Identification of sources of SC assists the implementation of appropriate activities to support and facilitate WBL programmes and can indicate where staff or system development is required

These activities include partnership working, staff development, resource allocation, curriculum design, facilitation and management of academic accreditation and administrative support systems

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Comment [DM1]: I have hyphenated 'work-based', save for where it appears in titles of one sort or another - MY

This chapter considers issues related to the provision of work-based learning [WBL] programmes by higher education institutions and discusses these programmes using the concept of structural capital. Structural capital is defined as the organising and structuring capability of the organisation as expressed in formal instruments, policies, regulations, procedures, codes, functional business units, task groups, committees or less formal culture, networks and practices (Stewart 1997) which influence practices and procedures. Our experiences of operating work-based learning programmes in two very different HE institutions provide illustrations of structural factors which enable and facilitate work-based learning. The discussion outlines the forms of work-based learning that both Universities employ, and considers some key aspects of WBL delivery which are directly impacted upon by the structures and processes within institutions which contribute to intra-institutional structural capital. A summary of practical examples is given at the end of the chapter.

Introduction

The Middlesex University WBL approach considers that learning at higher education level takes place primarily at and through work in order to meet both individual and organisational development needs. The organisation will usually be an employer but it could be a voluntary or professional body or possibly a client if the learner is self-employed. From outset in the early 1990s proponents of WBL at Middlesex proposed it as a 'field' of study rather than a 'mode', which meant that WBL took the form of a subject discipline in relation to the University's structural and procedural purposes (Garnett 2007). This meant that actual structural capital assets include:

- specific WBL programme level descriptors
- module learning outcomes
- a subject handbook
- assessment processes and boards

The ability to recommend specific qualification awards in WBL ranging from certificate to doctoral level is also structural capital. The innovative approach of 'field of study' allows the learner to respond to the needs of the workplace rather than be controlled by subject discipline constraints. It has provided a foundation upon which to build the structural capital resources for WBL within the University. These structural capital assets

have been further enhanced by the work of the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching in WBL and the recent strategic decision of the University to establish an Institute for Work Based Learning which has the academic and quality responsibilities for WBL and a remit to work on a pan-university basis. Both of these developments are designed to enhance and expand WBL as a mode as well as a field of study in order to maximise the impact of WBL across the University. The distinction between WBL as a field of study or as a mode of study should be borne in mind during this discussion.

The University of Westminster's approach to WBL is central to the University's mission of "educating for professional life". It locates WBL within the broader concept of 'work integrated learning' which are the pedagogic approaches concerned with integrating academic studies and working practices so that students, staff, employees and employers can develop their understanding of the reciprocal relationship between education and the world of work. This means that within the university there are varied approaches to the forms of WBL offered. Some forms and activities have been designed into courses from the start, whilst others have developed in an ad hoc manner and may have become formalised if considered valuable and sustainable. The main categories include fully embedded WBL courses and modules for employees, practice-based courses, sandwich years, short formal or informal placements with accredited learning, work-based project modules, on-campus businesses etc. The structural capital assets include university wide policies that require the development and integration of work integrated learning in all courses, employer engagement mechanisms and collaborative partnerships, and an academic framework which enables the validation of negotiated awards and titles at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The University's approach to work integrated learning was recognised by HEFCE in the award of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning to develop further the approach both within the University and with external partners.

Working in partnership

To be effective in meeting employers' or customer needs, WBL programmes need to be able to draw upon ways of working that are outside traditional subject disciplines and are trans-disciplinary. This includes partnerships with other providers of high level education as well as organisations, thereby promoting a collaborative approach to delivering learning. The formal instruments and policies that universities have in place to facilitate partnerships are, consequently, a form of structural capital. WBL programmes are often negotiated between the partners and individual learners and emerge from workplace and the learner/worker's needs rather than a related subject discipline, thus challenging the traditional approach to knowledge creation. This partnership model can be framed within a model of knowledge described by Gibbons et al (1994) as Mode 2 knowledge, which is trans-disciplinary, where knowledge is produced at the site of application and with the co-operation of users and stakeholders, and which can contribute to organisational structural capital. Example 1 demonstrates a model of how partnership working can articulate the different knowledge interests of the university and external organisations.

Example 1

Comment [DM2]: I'm taking the view that the examples aren't sufficiently lengthy to merit the label 'case study'. - MY

The School of Media, Art and Design at the University of Westminster developed a BA Fashion Merchandise Management course, the first of its kind in the UK, in association with Marks and Spencer. The company seconded a member of its organisation to the University for 18 months to devise the programme in collaboration with staff and in partnership with the top fashion companies in order to ensure that generic business approaches were blended with industry specific skills. The course includes a sandwich year combining work placement with a semester studying abroad in New York or Hong Kong. An industry advisory board comprising leading fashion retailers in the UK advises on the course and on new developments, such as a BA Buying Management, and on short 'bite-sized' courses for business including Tesco, Mothercare and Arcadia, which lead to a partnership WBL degree programme with Nottingham Trent University for Asda employees.

Structures to support learning

There are several distinctive features of WBL which Boud et al (2001) identify and which have specific resonance with structural capital. These include

- partnerships between an HEI and an organisation with infrastructures to support learning;
- a curriculum which derives from work and the needs of the learner rather than from subject disciplines;
- an individualised programme determined by the learners personal and professional learning needs which is ascertained at the outset;
- learning activities that are often centred around work-based projects which contribute to the needs of the organisation and are supported by both the university and the organisation; and, finally,
- the assessment framework, which is, of necessity, trans-disciplinary to cater for both subject discipline and organisational requirements and to meet quality assurance demands and provide educational processes that enable student assessment, progression and HE awards.

WBL features are in evidence within curriculum frameworks and learning resources that support the WBL programmes and are formalised within the course documentation, thereby contributing, as formal instruments of the institution, to the structural capital of the university. Example 2 demonstrates the design of a WBL course using the flexibility of the structural factors of the University of Westminster learning framework.

Example 2

The MA in Individual and Organisational Development at the University of Westminster has been designed to meet the specific needs of middle and senior managers from business, industry, public services and consultancy. The programme runs as a series of three-day themed modular learning bursts over two years, supported by one-day learning set meetings in between. Working in small groups in learning sets enables individuals to explore their own areas of interest, negotiate their

learning contracts and share their learning through participating in peer assessment, while learning bursts provide access to the whole group's community of knowledge and experience. Reflective practice and research methods modules run throughout the two years, underpinning the programme. Learning bursts cover the areas such as the dynamics of development, designing for learning, strategy and change management. The course culminates in a work-based project and a dissertation in a chosen area of interest. This structure allows people to maintain their working commitments during the duration of the programme.

Comment [DM3]: 'group's collective' ?
– MY

Using knowledge and information

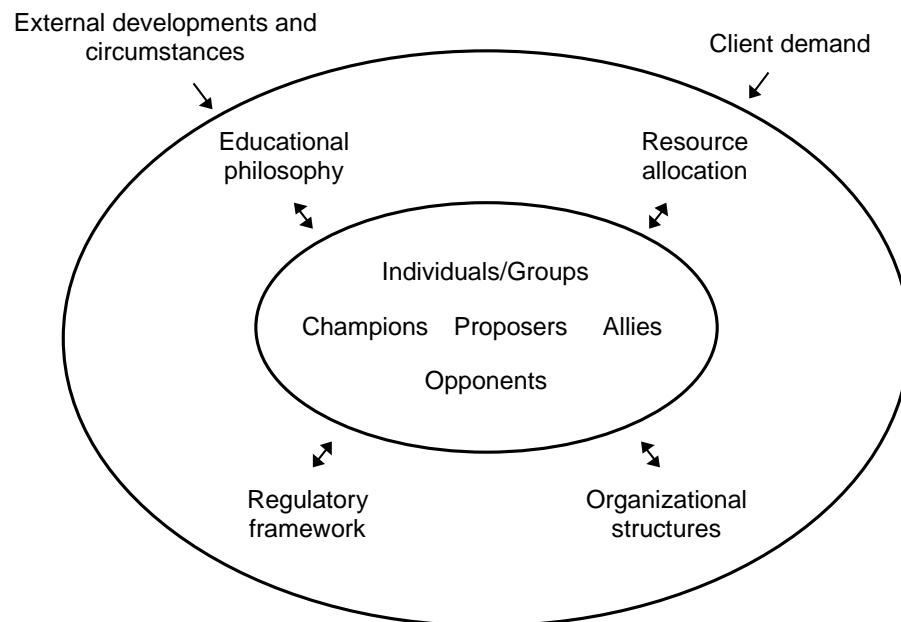
University WBL programmes are often represented by academia as an appropriate response to the needs of the “knowledge driven economy” (e.g. Boud and Solomon 2001), but as yet, the challenges to, and contribution of, WBL to the structural capital of higher education institutions has rarely been considered. In terms of knowledge management, it is recognised that the ability to understand and attach significance to information has more value than just acquiring more information, especially in the current culture of accessible and prolific information (Choo, 1998). Structural capital should be considered together with intellectual, human and customer capital as part of the HEI's resources. The generation and interpretation of information contributes to the intellectual capital of an organisation, as it draws on the combined knowledge, skills and capabilities from individuals and groups, and combines with the customer capital, which is the value of an organisation's relationship with the people with whom it does business. These contribute to the market influence in an organisation and are essential in enabling a provider to meet the needs of the customer, and thereby contribute to structural capital (Stewart, 1997). Consequently Stewart argues that managing structural capital promotes ‘rapid knowledge sharing, collective knowledge growth, shortened lead times and more productive people’ (ibid., p.110). Edvinson & Malone (1997) consider structural capital as essential in representing the needs of the customer as well as enabling internal processes to respond to external demands, and as such, it plays a strategic role in relation to both human and customer capital. For WBL in HE, the student centredness of WBL is emphasised in the form of focused responses to external organisations and a flexible curriculum which meets programme development needs for external customers, rather than grinding prevarication of HEI's validation processes.

Human and structural capital

Universities have seen traditionally their role as developers of human capital, and little attention has been paid to the potential of higher education to impact upon the structural capital of organisations. Whilst WBL appears to have the potential to impact upon intellectual capital in general, structural capital has a particular contribution to make in organisations as it can help learners develop and communicate their personal knowledge store by accessing and utilising information from others. The strategic role of structural capital is in enabling this new knowledge and information to be communicated to other individuals, be reinterpreted, synthesised and developed further to enable others to access, understand and transmit the new knowledge further. Structural capital's value is

its contribution to the organisation's purpose, through formulation and dissemination of organisational aims or informing decision making (Garnett, 2007), thus making the context of knowledge creation and use an essential component when manipulating information. For WBL the context of knowledge production is highly significant as knowledge that is created from work is contextualised, performative, and trans-disciplinary, and often contested (Boud, 2001) as there is rarely an authoritative source to define it, thus reflecting Mode 2 knowledge production. WBL creates new knowledge for use both in an organisation and the HEI, so such partnerships can foster mutual learning as well as draw on and extend the structural capital held between the two organisations. The HEI can contribute to the organisation by facilitating the transmission and integration of new knowledge through the WBL programme. Consequently the HEI needs regulations and procedures in place to support joint working and provide a vehicle for knowledge transmission through assessment and learning practices. This aspect of the interaction between Higher Education and the world of work can be the most difficult to initiate, develop and sustain. At Westminster the tasks of identifying relevant employers, particularly in sectors dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, and developing and maintaining networking strategies have been found to be lengthy processes requiring industry experience, commitment and communication skills as well as executive level sponsorship. Developing the structural capital of universities to support WBL is a highly "political" activity as it challenges the status quo across a range of critical areas (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1 The political arena for the development of structural capital to support University WBL



Portwood and Garnett (2000) highlight the significance of high level -champions, activists and allies in order to bring about change not ~~only in just in developing~~ curricula but also ~~um terms but also in relation to~~ when considering structural factors such as ~~the~~ ~~core areas of~~ educational philosophical ~~approaches~~, resource allocation, and academic regulations. The creation and consequent growth of WBL at Middlesex have been due to a well-established institutional approach to these issues. ~~These~~ in turn ~~has~~ve provided the foundations that have gradually enabled each school to begin to make local WBL innovations that have been culturally acceptable. Consequently the corporate aims and objectives of the HEI may need to include a commitment to organisational partnerships which includes management approaches, resources and protocols to support the development of such relationships. This enables the organisation to develop structural capital of its own through the process.

Comment [DM4]: there's a lot going on here – though I get the general drift, I wonder whether this might benefit from redrafting - MY

Regulations and procedures

Another practical expression of structural capital is in the form of regulations and procedures to accredit organisational learning external to the university, such as experiential learning, in-house training courses and competency frameworks. This academic accreditation recognises learning gained from external sources other than academia, by awarding credits that reflect the level and amount of complexity of learning. It differs from accreditation awarded by professional bodies which recognise professional equivalence and standards in a programme (see chapter ###). Institutions must be sufficiently versatile to accept this non-traditional knowledge and learning as being equal to, rather than supplanting, their own brand of learning, and provide processes through which learners can benefit from alternative learning experiences. Academics in higher education need staff development in order to be conversant with the university regulations to ensure that educationally sound programmes are developed, and be willing to work with the external organisation's counterpart to build programmes that both suit their needs, and fulfil requirements for quality assurance processes in higher education as well as those for integration and progression within future potential learning opportunities. Imposing subject discipline traditions or transferring higher education programmes wholesale to a WBL environment cannot and does not work, and should be discouraged, or the academics and institutions will lose credibility when trying to introduce WBL into an organisation.

Comment [DM5]: TBA by MY.

Example 3

The School of Health and Social Sciences at Middlesex was awarded a tender to accredit programmes in NHS leadership, to be delivered by three institutions external to the university; two of which were education and consultancy organisations. Two postgraduate diploma leadership programmes were accredited and the School continued in the role of quality assurance monitor and accreditation body until the programmes were complete. Progression for the participants was built into the programme in the form of access to a validated Middlesex WBL Masters

programme, which provided facilitation and support for participants whilst undertaking a relevant WBL project that had emerged from their leadership programme and work role. This demonstrates that curriculum flexibility within regulations facilitated a partnership between several organisations which benefited all participants and their organisations. Additional validation was not needed as the WBL curriculum is designed to allow access with previously accredited learning at the postgraduate diploma stage.

Recognition of external learning

At Middlesex, Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning [AP(E)L] is available for both individuals and organisations in respect of aspects of learning which may include in-house training and staff development (that has not been officially accredited), but which can form the basis of an individualised and negotiated WBL programme. At the University of Westminster similar AP(E)L regulations operate, including the accreditation of experiential learning that has taken place since students' commenced study at the University. The difference lies in the use of such credit for named awards rather than as part of the negotiation of individualised WBL programmes.

Garnett et al (2004) have argued that there is significant scope to rethink the purpose and practice of AP(E)L so that it becomes a tool for learning recognition and development within the context of partnership working, thus making a valuable contribution to the structural capital of both the educational provider and its partner organisations. Additionally, the design of a WBL curriculum which includes negotiated WBL projects that can be taken as 'stand alone' modules or integrated within the WBL programme enables external learning to be incorporated into the institution's currency of credits and academic levels and used towards a range of higher education awards. This meets the quality standards of the institution and the development needs of the learner, and also contributes to the organisation. Supporting and assessing WBL requires flexible academic staff who are able to facilitate adult and work-based learning in both subject and work disciplines whilst also appreciating the different values which each partner brings to the learning activity (Boud and Costley 2007). This is a demanding role to undertake as it requires the academic to be familiar with inherent factors in WBL, which are

- the context of learning,
- a curriculum which is work driven
- epistemological issues related to underlying subject knowledge
- the context of a work based partnership.
- learner centredness, and
- flexibility within, and responsiveness to, the learning and work environment.

For example, expecting course assignments to be submitted from a retail cohort during December, which is the peak of the trading year, would be, at the least, unrealistic but could also be detrimental to the partnership between the higher education institution and the organisation. Likewise, an appreciation of ethical and subject discipline codes are also key to smooth partnerships. For example, when WB learners are working with

Comment [DM6]: Not clear what the linkage is – could 'and' be replaced by 'in the context of', or similar? – MY

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children or in the health service, there are ethical issues involving access to potentially vulnerable subjects. Consequently learners in these disciplines will need informed guidance from their academic facilitators, but this might challenge current practice in the workplace where the knowledge of ethical practice may be tacit rather than explicit, and which would need to be reconciled within work, academic and professional boundaries. Having clear ethical protocols articulated within HEI structures provides a forum for the scrutiny of project proposals and quality assurance principles in which to frame practice and agree programmes. At Middlesex this takes the form of a programme approval board to oversee the coherence and ethical aspects of individual programmes, and which is a specific structural capital instrument to enable the student to progress and negotiate a target award.

Comment [DM7]: Might be worth spelling out what the relevance of the point to U-16s actually is here, otherwise readers might say, but we are dealing with post-compulsory-age people. – MY

Assessment procedures

Assessment of learning from the workplace has inherent dilemmas (Yorke, 2005). In practice based professions such as teaching and nursing, the concept of being assessed in practice is not new. For other less vocational subjects, the idea of integrating assessment or including awards of credit for learning from a placement experience can seem alien, particularly as credits are not awarded for experience, but for the learning that arises from it, which can be a challenging concept. It is a tension that constantly underpins the range of all forms of WBL. In WBL there can be additional assessment pressures as individuals must function competently in the workplace as well submitting academic assignments, as many WBL students are primarily workers studying part-time rather than full-time students working part-time. The challenge therefore for WBL in higher education is to provide assessment tasks that align assessment requirements with individual learning needs, whether those are intellectual challenges or achievement of practical competences. This includes aspects of assessment that monitor learner performance, such as placement assessment, as well as gauging progress against course performance indicators and quality assurance standards, but which also broadens academic skills and knowledge, and engage individuals in studying areas of preferred academic interest. The recently updated QAA guidelines (QAA 2007) on workplace and work-based learning identify the responsibilities of both the higher education institution and the organisation in assessment activities, and making these work in practice is a function of the structural capital of both parties.

Example 4 demonstrates the joint use of structural capital resulting from the meshing of NHS training with the academic approach to WBL projects which produced work outcomes that were fit for purpose and also blended subject discipline knowledge within the programme, whilst working across professional disciplines in a specific project context. The accreditation of NHS training (the organisation's structural capital) amalgamated with higher education accreditation and curriculum procedures, enabled both organisations to increase their structural capital.

Example 4

A cohort of 6 learners completed a Middlesex WBL Masters programme in Cancer Services Improvement within the NHS, where they were working to modernise services to speed patients through the waiting lists

for access to, diagnosis of, or treatment of cancer. Their backgrounds varied from health care professionals, such as nurses, to administrators who had demonstrated a flair for project management. The programme started by recognising and accrediting the in-house training provided by the NHS in service training in improvement techniques and processes, for which each learner made an individual accreditation claim by portfolio. It concluded by each student working on WBL projects in their own NHS Trusts. These projects included: reducing waiting times for urological and gastro-intestinal investigations; introduction of patient information for cancer services across an NHS Trust hospital; user involvement in designing cancer services; redesigning radiology and ultrasound services, and evaluation of video conferencing consultations. The WBL partnership with the commissioners, who were the ~~Cancer~~ ~~sServices'~~ ~~collaborative~~ Collaborative body, provided an academic pathway that ~~recognised~~ recognised the unique and influential roles that these learners had in their own workplaces, and provided a framework within which they could gain an academic qualification (Workman, in press).

Comment [B8]:

Comment [B9]: This is a title of an actual professional body so needs to be capitalised

Comment [B10]:

This example also demonstrates that the choice of WBL project can enhance an individual's work activities. These projects were already being undertaken by the students on the programme, and required a three-way learning agreement between the student, their sponsor or organisation and the university. By using a work-based project that met all the stakeholder requirements, the student gained academic skills and a research focused, critically analytical project and the organisation invested in the development of critical appraisal skills by members of staff who had also gained confidence in their work role. At the same time, the institution maintained its quality assurance processes and achieved successful graduates by drawing on the intellectual, human and structural capital of both organisations.

Administrative processes

Continuing experience of WBL in both universities has identified that a potential major area of stress and difficulty for both students and academic staff is that of the administration processes that underpin student programmes. University administrative systems are designed for traditional student programmes of full-time study, over a period of three years. WBL students do not fit this pattern. They need to be able to self-defer submission dates to fit in with work commitments, as can occur, for instance, in the retail sector in the Christmas period. Changes in funding of posts and short-term contracts can impact upon student progression, due to work roles being replaced, relocated or redefined, and therefore models of progression should allow stepping-off points, with return to study being permissible without incurring penalties. Most academic record systems tend not to cater for such idiosyncrasies and over-riding pre-determined programme designs can invite a variety of gremlins to enter such systems, not least in the area of finance and sponsorship: this can undermine successful partnerships between organisations and higher education. Evidence is strong that traditional funding models are unwieldy and inadequate where there are significant numbers of WBL students. This

is particularly relevant at undergraduate level where customised provision allowing alternative timescales and ratio of learning workloads is at odds with the university regulations and the economies of scale currently encouraged in mass higher education. If WBL is to make a significant contribution to improving the UK workforce, as identified by Leitch (DfES, 2006) as well as other drivers of widening participation and access to higher education, national and institutional target-setting and resource allocation needs to consider a move from the concept of prescribed course standards to supporting learning pathways of variable duration and credit values (Garnett, 2007).

Conclusion

Effective WBL provision within higher education institutions involves a number of structural capital issues that are ongoing and essential to the effective delivery of WBL. These are real issues as they have to be fully integrated into the functioning of the institution and monitored through times of institutional change in order to be refreshed and updated in the light of changing practice. It is anticipated that these issues are likely to have a ripple effect in that, once systems are designed to respond to one group of non-traditional students, principles are generated and transferable to others demonstrating that there is real potential to improve the way an institution functions and responds to the needs of a knowledge-driven economy.

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Comment [DM11]: Page-span for this?

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Comment [DM13]: Same title as Edvinsson?Yes JG

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Comment [DM14]: Am assumption – MY BW yes

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Table 1. Examples of Structural Capital.

Types of structural capital (Stewart, 1997)	Practical examples
Formal Instruments	Curriculum frameworks responsive to external requirements Assessment framework
Policies	Learning and Teaching e.g. learner-centredness of HEI. Recognition of learning from experience/external activity Collaboration with external providers e.g. Link tutor role and expectations. Explicit management support for WBL across Departments
Regulations	Academic regulations allowing specific amounts of external accreditation within University programmes. Ethical requirements for subject disciplines within WBL projects Academic framework Academic accreditation of external courses Quality assurance and enhancement
Procedures	Assessment procedures including assessment boards, moderation processes etc. Assignment submission – e.g. linked to finances to ensure fees collected. Accreditation procedures for individuals and organisations. Three-way learning agreement between learner, higher education institution and employer Ratification of individual's negotiated programmes. Sandwich courses allocations and monitoring Resource allocation to support WBL
Codes	Link Tutor relationship with organisations Placement/ practice requirements and learning support Organisational partnerships
Formal structures	Management and delivery of WBL programmes Accreditation and Organisational partnership activities Financial contracts and negotiations e.g. for cohorts Contractual agreements when working with external organisations
Task groups	Articulation agreements e.g. with other education providers Creation of practice policies/ practices Placement developments Quality monitoring & Enhancement
Committees	Assessment boards Accreditation Boards Programme Approval Boards Developmental work in WBL
Networks	Information sharing between internal and external organisations

	<p>and subject specialists</p> <p>Trans-disciplinary groups to support and maintain WBL developments</p> <p>Project supervisors in different disciplines sharing WBL information/ practice</p> <p>Practitioners and linked Workplaces</p> <p>FE Colleges: e.g. Foundation degree deliverers and purchasers</p>
Practices	<p>Level Descriptors and Module learning outcomes</p> <p>Module resources shared across disciplines</p> <p>Teaching allowances and project supervision</p> <p>Financial processes for non-traditional students</p> <p>Staff development for WBL programmes</p> <p>Programme delivery and education practices</p> <p>Learning activities for non traditional students</p> <p>Resource allocation per student</p> <p>Variety of assessment approaches suitable for use in WBL</p>